

Writing Tips: Formal Writing Voice

Have you ever attended an event in which "formal" attire is expected? You probably did not wear old jeans with holes in the knees, a stained tee shirt promoting your favorite beverage, and a pair of sandals. You probably chose more formal attire.

If you were giving an important speech to a group of people you do not know, would you use the same kind of language you use when talking with friends? Probably not.

Recognizing your lack of familiarity with the audience, the importance of the occasion, your desire to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject, and the impression you would like to make, you would probably use a more formal voice for your speech than what you would use when talking with close friends.

For academic essays, you should use a formal writing voice. You should use the kind of language you would use when giving an important speech, not the kind of language you might use when talking with close friends. A formal tone helps establish the writer's respect for the audience and suggests that the writer is serious about his or her topic. It is the kind of tone that educated people use when communicating with other educated people. Most academic writing uses a formal tone.

The following guidelines should help you maintain a formal writing voice in your essays.

1. Do not use first-person pronouns ("I," "me," "my," "we," "us," etc.).

Using these expressions in analytical and persuasive essays can make the writing wordy, can make the writer seem less confident of his or her ideas, and can give the essay an informal tone. Readers will know that they are reading your thoughts, beliefs, or opinions, so you do not need to state, "I think that," "I believe that," or "in my opinion." Simply delete these expressions from sentences, and you will be left with stronger sentences.

Example

I think that this character is confused.

This character is confused.

(The second sentence is less wordy, sounds more formal, and conveys a more confident tone.)

"One," "the reader," "readers," "the viewer," or something similar sometimes can be used effectively in place of first-person pronouns in formal papers, but be careful not to overuse these expressions. You want to sound formal, not awkward and stiff.

Example

I can sense the character's confusion.

Readers can sense the character's confusion.

Academic Writer

academic writer: tone: impersonal it

The impersonal 'it'

An objective or neutral tone is good news in academic writing. The impersonal 'it' can be used in order to take the focus off yourself (recommended!).

For example, a phrase such as 'I would argue that' could be replaced by 'It can be argued that...' This signals that you are **going to** argue something. In this way it points **forward** in the text. By contrast see backward referring it. It also has the effect of reducing your personal profile (a positive thing) by avoiding the use of 'I'.

- * Recommendation: Learn a few of the following phrases to use at sentence and paragraph beginnings.

EXAMPLE 1

It can be argued that...	It is important to recognize that...	It is only to be expected that...
It is also worth noting that...	It is likely that...	It is possible that...
It is anticipated that...	It is not clear whether...	It is significant that...
It is assumed that...	It is not surprising then, that...	It is sometimes suggested that...
It is clear that...	It is not surprising to find that...	It is unlikely that...
It is difficult to see...	It is not unreasonable to suggest that...	It is worth pointing out that...
It is essential, therefore, that...	It is not, however, simply a matter of...	It may seem surprising to say that...
It is evident that...	It is noteworthy that...	It seems that...
It is for this reason that...	It is now clear that...	It would seem clear that...
It is important to note that...	It is often argued that...	

* EXAMPLE 2

It was impossible now to conceive of a great power that was not a great economy.

Thus it was easy for the leaders to dominate the organization.

It was the arrival of Lenin, which changed everything in Russia.

It was also difficult politically, when the new parties refused to cooperate with the old governments.

It would seem clear that the traditional lecture/tutorial methods would not be able to cope easily with the demand unless there was a large increase in numbers of academic staff.

Academic Writer

academic writer: tone: one

One

If you want to create an objective or neutral tone, then avoid using the pronoun 'I'. Using the pronoun 'one' is a possibility.

* EXAMPLES OF COMMON PHRASES

one could envisage

one might expect

one need only turn to

one could argue that

one might ask

The question one seeks to answer is

one could seriously question

one must remember

* EXAMPLES OF SENTENCES

The institution itself has to recognize the need for change and be prepared for it, and one could argue that the management become heavily involved in the change itself.

Michael Davis notes that in thinking like an engineer, one must remember the place of a code of ethics in the practice of his/her profession.

Since computer-integration systems perform the changes in the same way each time, one might expect them to make more reliable changes, even if they are effected more slowly.

If this argument were truly compelling, one might have expected many more of the forward-thinking companies, to have adopted FMS technology as a stepping-stone towards the flexible technology of the 21st-century plant

As flexibility increases, the performance of the system improves, as one might expect.

For example, one might ask for proposals concerning biology of plants of agricultural importance.

There are super-successes, these days, but no legends. To get a hint of what is missing, one need only turn to recent video and audio releases: Reissues feature prominently.

Since there already exist complicated statistical techniques that function well, one could seriously question the need for developing alternative models that do not have the advantage of being simple and easy to use.

With partnerships under carefully specified franchising arrangements, one could envisage the first or even the first and second years of a degree programme being delivered close to home.

2. Avoid addressing readers as "you."

Addressing readers using second-person pronouns ("you, your") can make an essay sound informal and can bring assumptions into an essay that are not true. A student once wrote in her essay, "If you wear a tube top, guys might think that you are easy." I wondered why the student would think that I, a male, would wear a tube top. As with first-person pronouns, second-person pronouns can be replaced by words such as "one," "the reader," "readers," and "the viewer."

3. Avoid the use of contractions.

Contractions are shortened versions of words that use apostrophes in place of letters, such as "can't," "isn't," "she's," and "wouldn't." The more formal, non-contracted versions are "cannot," "is not," "she is," and "would not." You might be surprised by how much better a sentence can sound if non-contracted versions of the words replace the contractions.

Example

The character isn't aware that he's surrounded by people he can't trust.

The character is not aware that he is surrounded by people he cannot trust.

Making your writing more formal by avoiding contractions is easy: just find the contractions and replace them with the non-contracted versions of the words.

4. Avoid colloquialism and slang expressions.

Colloquial diction is informal language used in everyday speech and includes such words as "guys," "yeah," "stuff," "kind of," "okay," and "big deal." Highly informal diction, such as "freak out" and "dissing," falls into the category of "slang." While slang words often are vivid and expressive, slang comes and goes quickly, another reason why slang should be avoided in formal writing. Both colloquialism and slang expressions convey an informal tone and should be avoided in formal writing.

Example

The guy was nailed for ripping off a liquor store.

The man was convicted of robbing a liquor store.

As you avoid informal language, be careful not to use words that suggest ideas that you may not intend. "The gentleman was convicted of robbing a liquor store" would probably leave readers wondering why the man who robbed the store is considered to be a "gentleman." Likewise, "the lady was convicted of robbing a liquor store" would probably cause readers to wonder why a woman who robs a liquor store is considered to be a "lady."

5. Avoid nonstandard diction.

Nonstandard diction refers to expressions that are not considered legitimate words according to the rules of Standard English usage. Nonstandard diction includes "ain't," "theirselves," "hissself," "anyways," "alot" (the accepted version is "a lot"), and "alright" (the accepted version is "all right"). Most good dictionaries will identify such expressions with the word "Nonstandard." Because nonstandard expressions generally are not regarded as legitimate words, I mark these expressions in essays as examples of "inaccurate word choice."

6. Avoid abbreviated versions of words.

For example, instead of writing "photo," "phone" and "TV," write "photograph," "telephone," and "television."

7. Avoid the overuse of short and simple sentences.

While the writer might use formal diction in such sentences, too many short and simple sentences can make an essay sound informal, as if the writer is not recognizing that the audience is capable of reading and understanding more complex and longer sentences. Short and simple sentences can be used effectively in formal writing, but heavy reliance on such sentences reflects poorly on the writer and gives the writing an informal tone.

*Information provided by Randy Rambo, Instructor at IVCC.

Academic Writer

academic writer: tone: commenting on your own work

Commenting on your own work

If you wish to show your attitude to what you are saying, it is possible to use one of the following words at the beginning of a sentence. Note: this is a good way of **avoiding** phrases such as 'In my opinion'.

Interestingly,

Admittedly,

Surprisingly,

Predictably,

Significantly,

Understandably,

Crucially,

Academic Writer 2000

* Discuss w/ Honors introducing characters/situations.
Assume that your Reader has never Read the novel.

ex. Atticus' trial →

ex. Calpurnia →

Academic Writer

academic writer: tone: we

Use of 'we'

If you wish to identify your reader with your own viewpoint, you can use 'we' rather than 'I'. This has the effect of 'carrying' your reader with you as you develop your argument. It may also have the effect of convincing your reader of your point of view. It is a rather more subtle device than always using the personal pronoun 'I' or such phrases as 'In my opinion'.

EXAMPLE

In the following example, the position outlined is not necessarily true! Do we live 'in strange times that resemble the superstitious fervor of the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'? This is open to question. If the writer had said:

'In my opinion we live in strange times that resemble the superstitious fervor of the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' readers might think "Ah ha! That's only an opinion!" or "What rubbish!". However by cleverly starting off with the pronoun 'We', the reader is invited to agree with the writer.

The same impersonal argument can be created by the repeated use of pronouns.

We live in strange times that resemble the superstitious fervor of the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is today a "great fear" that grips our society, and that is fear of child abuse. Rightfully we wish to identify and punish these genuine "enemies" and point every finger of accusation at them. But this does not mean, of course, that every perceived enemy, every person with whom we may have fought, should be labeled in this same way.

You can also use 'we' to point your readers backwards and forwards in your paper:

We have seen how the religious houses were destroyed. Now let us turn to the effects of their destruction on the people as a whole.

We have noted the effects of an unrestrained free market economy, for examples the 'boom-bust' cycle.

We may wish to see more evidence in support of this viewpoint, but this must await the publication of ongoing research.

Academic Writer 2000

Converting an informal text into a formal text

On this page you will be given a text about the issue of whether the government should introduce tighter controls on the ownership of guns. The text is written in an *informal* style. When we are speaking about these issues we usually use an informal style like the one below. So the text contains the type of language we use in *spoken* debates or *discussions*. However, we have seen in this unit of study that argumentative essays use a much more *formal* academic style. You will be asked to rewrite the text in this formal academic style.

Task: Changing an informal argumentative text into a formal argumentative paragraph

The following text is written in an informal tone.

Main premise: *The government should introduce tighter gun controls*

Jack Spring thinks that everyone should have the right to own a gun but I don't agree with him. People like him think that the government is infringing our democratic rights when it restricts gun ownership. They think that most people who own guns are responsible citizens who keep the guns for sport and recreation. They also think that the police are unable to stop violent crime and we need guns to protect ourselves. But I think he's wrong. I agree with Josephine Bluff who thinks that guns increase the amount of violent crime in the community. I also think that human life is worth more than sporting shooters right to go shooting on the weekend. And I also think that many of the guns that are kept around the house end being used in violent domestic disputes or teenage suicides.

The following is one suggested translation of the informal text into a formal paragraph:

Main premise: *The government should introduce tighter gun controls*

Jack Spring maintains that everyone should have the right to own a gun. *This position asserts that* the government is infringing our democratic rights when it restricts gun ownership. Most people who own guns, *so this argument goes*, are responsible citizens who keep the guns for sport and recreation. *It is further contended that* the police are unable to stop violent crime and we need guns to protect ourselves. *However, as Josephine Bluff states*, guns increase the amount of violent crime in the community. *Moreover*, human life is worth more than sporting shooters right to go shooting on the weekend. *In addition*, many of the guns that are kept around the house end being used in violent domestic disputes or teenage suicides.

*Information taken from the Writing Center at Brown University.

Effective Academic Writing: The Argument

What this handout is about...

This handout will define what an argument is and why you need one in most of your academic essays.

Arguments are everywhere...

You may be surprised to hear that the word "argument" does not have to be written anywhere in your assignment for it to be an important part of your task. In fact, making an argument--expressing a point of view on a subject and supporting it with evidence--is often the aim of academic writing. Your instructors may assume that you know this fact, and therefore they may not explain its importance to you in class. Nevertheless, if your writing assignment asks you to respond to reading and discussion in class, your instructor likely expects you to produce an argument in your paper.

Most material you learn in college is or has been debated by someone, somewhere, at some time. Even when the material you read or hear is presented as simple "information" or "fact," it may actually be one person's interpretation of a set of information or facts. In your writing, instructors may call on you to question that interpretation and either defend it, refute it, or offer some new view of your own. In writing assignments, you will almost always need to do more than just present information that you have gathered or regurgitate information that was discussed in class. You will need to select a point of view and provide evidence (in other words, use "argument") to shape the material and offer your interpretation of the material.

If you think that "fact," not argument, rules intelligent thinking, consider these examples. At one point, the "great minds" of Western Europe firmly believed the Earth was flat. They had discussions about how obviously true this "fact" was. You are able to disagree now because people who saw that argument as faulty set out to make a better argument and proved it. The more recent O.J. Simpson trial provides another example. Both the prosecution and the defense used DNA testing but in totally different ways. The prosecution brought in DNA experts to prove that DNA testing was good evidence, while the defense called other experts to prove it was poor evidence. Differences of opinion are how human knowledge develops, and scholars

like your instructors spend their lives engaged in debate over what may be counted as "true," "real," or "right" in their fields. In their courses, they want you to engage in similar kinds of critical thinking and debate in your writing.

Argumentation is not just what your instructors do. We all use argumentation on a daily basis, and you probably already have some skill at crafting an argument. The more you improve your skills in this area, the better you will be at thinking critically, reasoning, making choices, and weighing evidence.

Making a Claim

What is an argument? In academic writing, an argument is usually a main idea, often called a "claim" or "thesis statement," backed up with evidence that supports the idea. Ninety-nine percent of the time you will need to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it, and your ability to do this well will separate your papers from those of students who see assignments as mere accumulations of fact and detail. In other words, gone are the happy days of being given a "topic" about which you can write anything. It is time to stake out a position and prove why it is a good position for a thinking person to hold.

Claims can be as simple as "protons are positively charged and electrons are negatively charged," with evidence such as, "In this experiment, protons and electrons acted in such and such a way." Claims can also be as complex as "the end of the South African system of apartheid was inevitable," using reasoning and evidence such as, "Every successful revolution in the modern era has come about after the government in power has given and then removed small concessions to the uprising group." In either case, the rest of your paper will detail reasons and facts that have led you to believe that your position is best.

When beginning to write a paper, ask yourself, "What is my point"? For example, the point of this handout is to help you become a better writer, and we are arguing that an important step in the process of writing argumentation is understanding the concept of argumentation. If your papers do not have a main point, they cannot be arguing for anything. Asking yourself what your point is can help you avoid a mere "information dump." Consider this: Your instructors probably know a lot more than you do about your subject matter. Why, then, would you want to provide them with material they already know? Instructors are usually looking for two things:

- **Proof that you understand the material, AND**
- **A demonstration of your ability to use or apply the material beyond what you have**

read or heard.

This second part can be done in many ways: You can critique the material, or apply it to something else, or even just explain it in a different way. In order to achieve this second step, though, you must have a particular point to argue.

Arguments in academic writing are usually complex and take time to develop. Your argument will need to be more than a simple or obvious statement such as, "Frank Lloyd Wright was a great architect." Such a statement might capture your initial impressions of Wright as you have studied him in class; however, you need to look deeper and express specifically what caused that "greatness." Your instructor will probably expect something more complicated, such as, "Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture combines elements of European modernism, Asian aesthetic form, and locally found materials to create a unique new style," or "There are many strong similarities between Wright's building designs and those of his mother's, which suggests that he may have borrowed some of her ideas." Then you would define your terms and prove your argument with evidence from Wright's drawings and buildings and those of the other architects you mentioned.

Evidence

Do not stop with having a point. You have to back up your point with evidence. The strength of your evidence, and your use of it, can make or break your argument. You already have the natural inclination for this type of thinking, if not in an academic setting. Think about how you talked your parents into letting you borrow the car. Did you present them with lots of instances of trustworthiness on your part from the past? Did you make them feel guilty, because your friends' parents all let them drive? Did you whine until they just wanted you to shut up? Did you look up statistics on teen driving and use them to show how you didn't fit the dangerous-driver profile? These are all types of argumentation, and they exist in academia in similar forms.

Every field has slightly different requirements for acceptable evidence, so familiarize yourself with some arguments from within that field instead of just applying whatever evidence you like best. Pay attention to your textbooks and your instructor's lectures. What types of argument and evidence are they using? The type of evidence that sways an English instructor may not work to convince a Sociology instructor. Find out what counts as proof that something is true in that field. Is it statistics, a logical development of points, something from the object being discussed

(art work, text, culture, or atom), the way something works, or some combination of more than one of these things?

Be consistent with your evidence. Unlike negotiating for the use of your parents' car, a college paper is not the place for an all-out blitz of every type of argument. You can often use more than one type of evidence within a paper, but make sure that within each section you are providing the reader with evidence appropriate to each claim. So, if you start a paragraph or section with a statement like "putting the student section closer to the court in the Dean Dome will raise player performance," do not follow with your evidence on how much more tuition is raised by letting more students go to games for free. Information about how fan support raises player morale, which then results in better play, would be a better follow-up. Then the next section could offer clear reasons why undergraduates have as much or more right to attend an undergraduate event as wealthy alumni--but not in the same section as the fan support stuff. You cannot convince a confused person, so keep things tidy and ordered.

Counterargument

One way to strengthen your argument and show that you have a deep understanding of the issue you are discussing is to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections. By considering what someone who disagrees with your position might have to say about your argument, you show that you have thought things through, and you dispose of some of the reasons your audience might have for not accepting your argument. Recall our discussion of student seating in the Dean Dome. To make the most effective argument possible, you should consider not only what students would say about seating, but also what alumni who have paid a lot to get good seats might say about the issue.

You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself what someone who disagrees with you might say about each of the points you've made or about your position as a whole. If you can't immediately imagine another position, here are some strategies to try:

- Do some research. It may seem to you that no one could possibly disagree with the position you are arguing, but someone probably has. For example, some people argue that the American Civil War never ended. If you are making an argument concerning, for example, the outcomes of the Civil War, you might wish to see what some of these people have to say.
- Talk with a friend or with your teacher. Another person may be able to imagine counterarguments that haven't occurred to you.

- Consider the conclusion and the premises of your argument, and imagine someone who denies each of them. Then you can see which of these arguments are most worth considering. For example, if you argued "Cats make the best pets. This is because they are clean and independent," you might imagine someone saying "Cats do not make the best pets. They are dirty and needy."

Once you have thought up some counterarguments, consider how you will respond to them--will you concede that your opponent has a point but explain why your audience should nonetheless accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, you will want to leave your reader with a sense that your argument is stronger than opposing arguments.

When you are summarizing opposing arguments, be charitable. Present each argument fairly and objectively, rather than trying to make it look foolish. You want to show that you have seriously considered the many sides of the issue, and that you are not simply attacking or caricaturing your opponents.

It is usually better to consider one or two serious counterarguments in some depth, rather than to give a long but superficial list of many different counterarguments and replies.

Be sure that your reply is consistent with your original argument. If considering a counterargument changes your position, you will need to go back and revise your original argument accordingly.

*Information taken from the UNC-CH Writing Center.